A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CAREER EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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Abstract

The efforts to reduce the widened effects of structural inequality for women in South Africa have resulted in varied experiences (Burns, Tomita, & Lund, 2017). The study problematised the unresearched and not well articulated social construct within the career experiences of women working in a telecommunication company in South Africa. This article argues that the meaning ascribed to the socio context and equity policy can better describe the dimension of the broader issue of gender inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. The study contributes to discourse analysis methods where discourse analysis was used to explain the experiences of three women who are senior managers with at least ten years of experience. The discourse-based understanding of the experiences of women in this study was reframed into and within the interactions of equity policy deliberation, societal factors and the organisational context model. These interactions allowed interpretation of the career choice for women and what it means for personal development. The model of career experience depicts strong alternative views on a career path for women. The results of this study provide unique findings for justice regulation in the workplace for women in South Africa.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Career, Women, Experience, Workplace, South Africa

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women are a growing part of the domestic and global workforce, with, according to estimates, about 70% of working-age women who work outside of their homes (Klasen, 2019). Despite this, unfairness in the workforce continues to be a problem for women in job segregation, corporate culture, stereotypes, unequal pay, career progress, and exclusion from certain fields and positions that are considered masculine (Hakim, 2004). Perhaps, mostly ignored is the issue of how career choice and opportunities are provided for women in male-dominated companies (Paichadze, Kharadze, Giorgobiani, & Nikvashvili, 2019). In sub-Saharan Africa, reports illustrate that women's participation in the workforce has slightly increased compared to the past two decades across African regions (Punnett & Clarke, 2017). Women in various countries of sub-Saharan Africa today constitute at least 46.2% of the workforce (The World Bank, 2021). This statistic is especially true in South Africa, particularly in professional jobs, with an estimated projection of an increase to 48% in 2025 (Nkomo, 2012). Although female participation in the workforce tends to be highly concentrated in a quite narrow range of occupations, they are still clustered in the lower echelons of professional hierarchies, while elite positions are reserved for men (Klasen, 2019). This reality shows that attempts to redress inequality and increase gender participation in the workplace require an effective methodological approach.

In South Africa, women represent a smaller proportion in the workforce than men, while some of them are not economically active (STATS SA, 2014, p. 26). In 2014, at the management level in the private and public sectors, the South African labour force survey revealed that, compared to men, women were not being accorded equal treatment in terms of conditions of service in respect of their participation levels in management (STATS SA, 2014, p. 26). Despite the fact that the proportion of women employed in the workforce increased by 5.6% in the last decades from 2001 to 2011, the primary sectors such as education showed an increase of 9.2% for men in the workforce in South Africa as compared to 4% only for women (STATS SA, 2014, p. 34). This proportion of men to women is inadequate. Therefore, this trend, together with the inequality in income demonstrates that women are disadvantaged as a result of employment policy and certain organisational norms that do not favour women (STATS SA, 2014, p. 40). This trend is particularly true in organisations dominated by men (Amis, Munir, Lawrence, Hirsch, & McGahan, 2018). Women made up 43.4% of the total South Africa workforce in the second quarter of 2018, but this proportion was expected to increase in the next five years (STATS SA, 2021). However, women still struggle to be well represented in leadership positions in virtually all sectors of the economy in South Africa (Willows & van der Linde 2016). On the other hand, an understanding of the social context and historical background of South Africa is essential to understand how women have experienced equity policy in South Africa.

This study was formulated and conceptualised based on the critical discussion of inequality and the problem of gender discrimination in developing countries (Bilan, Mishchuk, Samoliuk, & Mishchuk, 2020). The literature mostly talked about gender discrimination broadly and often related to aspects of society such as equal pay, the role of women in society, and why it is necessary for women to occupy a leadership position in society (Dale, 2017). These thoughts mostly ignored the micro-economics aspect of inequality in the industry which is political, power-driven and deeply social.

Therefore, this article aims to bring critical perspectives to the study of women and industry from interdisciplinary subjects of sociology, economics and education. Thus, the main research question in this paper is: *How career experiences of women were influenced by systemic issues and structural factors in developing countries, particularly South Africa?*

As a result, the paper developed a conceptual model based on the conceptual thinking and problems from the literature to narrow down the analysis to the context of South Africa. So, the methodological approach includes data collection through interviewing senior women managers in a telecommunication organisation in South Africa to analyse the career experience of women using the discourse analysis process. This process includes extracting meaning from findings to develop further arguments and models that could reveal both the economic and sociological gaps in the study of women in the industry in developing countries.

Finally, this study will contribute, first to the literature on gender study and economics view of women in the developing countries. Secondly, this study exposes not only why women are discriminated against but also points dangers of ignoring or formulating policies from the grassroots, and that is why developing countries continue to struggle to meet local policy targets and sustainable development goals (SDGs) targets in the area of gender equality (Dost, 2020).

Hence, the structure of the paper includes an introduction, followed by the literature review and conceptual framework, research methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. The literature review in Section 2 demonstrates and provides information regarding policy context in relation to working in South Africa in general, women in particular. The analysis engaged and articulated major issues that affect the career progression of women. Similarly, the conceptual framework provides the analytical lens for understanding the phenomenon of career progression, opportunities, barriers, policy and other systemic issues that women face on a daily basis. It is followed by a methodological approach in Section 3 that is based on a qualitative study where an interview was used as a method of data collection. The results (Section 4), discussion (Section 5) and conclusion (Section 6) demonstrate what is known in the literature but different in terms of changes that are needed to a policy of transformation in South Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Women still experience invisible barriers that militate against them accessing top executive and managerial positions in the South African workplace environment (Mwashita, Zungu, & Abrahams, 2020). These impediments arise predominantly from a persistent masculine unfairness in organisational culture, identified as the glass ceiling (Moalusi & Jones, 2019). Only a few women have made it to the very top in the corporate world. However, this experience is still very prevalent in all but a handful of countries, including South Africa, despite women's increased work performance, employability and qualifications (Botha, 2017). The inability of most women to attain career advancement is what economists considered a structural inequality problem which is mostly due to family commitments that men don't usually experience (Jayachandran, 2021). However, the glass ceiling has proved resistant to affirmative action, sensitisation of human resource staff and senior managers and processes to promote a work-family balance and a broad recognition of the value of investing in talents and qualities of both women and men at all organisational levels (Princess, Agwu, Ohaegbu, & Agumadu, 2018). The existence of isolation at the workplace is a prime example of discrimination against women through vertical separation by gender (Boehmer, 2017). This tradition exists because women's career paths tend to be more interrupted and circuitous than men's more linear career paths, hindering women's career progress to top positions. Women in the South African corporate workforce are still primarily placed in non-strategic

sectors rather than in the so-called line positions that involve revenue-generating responsibilities or financial decision-making positions critical for advancement (Zajiji, Wilson-Prangley, & Ndletyana, 2021). However, the glass ceiling in the workplace has been extended to apply to other horizontal and vertical occupational segregation areas, forming glass walls leading to a concentration of women in certain organisational sectors in South Africa (Morgan, 2017). Women cannot jump the gap between administrative and managerial functions regardless of their experience and educational attainments. They remain trapped to a sticky floor in the lowest-paid jobs on the bottom rungs of their career, making it difficult for them to climb through the occupational ladder (Kulik & Rae, 2019). Segregation has been cited in explaining the underrepresentation of women in the corporate South African workforce (Gradín, 2017).

The organisational culture has hindered women's career advancement in the South African workforce (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). Thus, the attitude being exhibited through discrimination and bias on the part of the men who are regarded as the dominant group is a major cause of disparity among individual workers, especially women who have been victims of denial to access workplace positions and rewards (Offermann & Foley, 2020). For instance, the concentration of power and authority in male elites creates specific organisational structural features that determine women's social status in the organisation and predominantly reproduces institutional practice types such as patriarchy at the workplace (Salem & Yount, 2019). South African women, therefore, look up to the work-related hierarchy and get a clear vision of the top rungs, but they cannot see where they will experience invisible obstacles (Bernstein, 2019). In other words, the roots of gender discrimination are built into a plethora of workplace cultural norms, traditions and images that appear unbiased, including definitions of commitment, competency and leadership (Lehner, 2021). It means the career trajectory of women may not only be altered because of the top-down policy system; there is a possibility that the existing workplace norms may also be challenged. Whether women are challenging it and/or winning will depend on how they narrate their experiences.

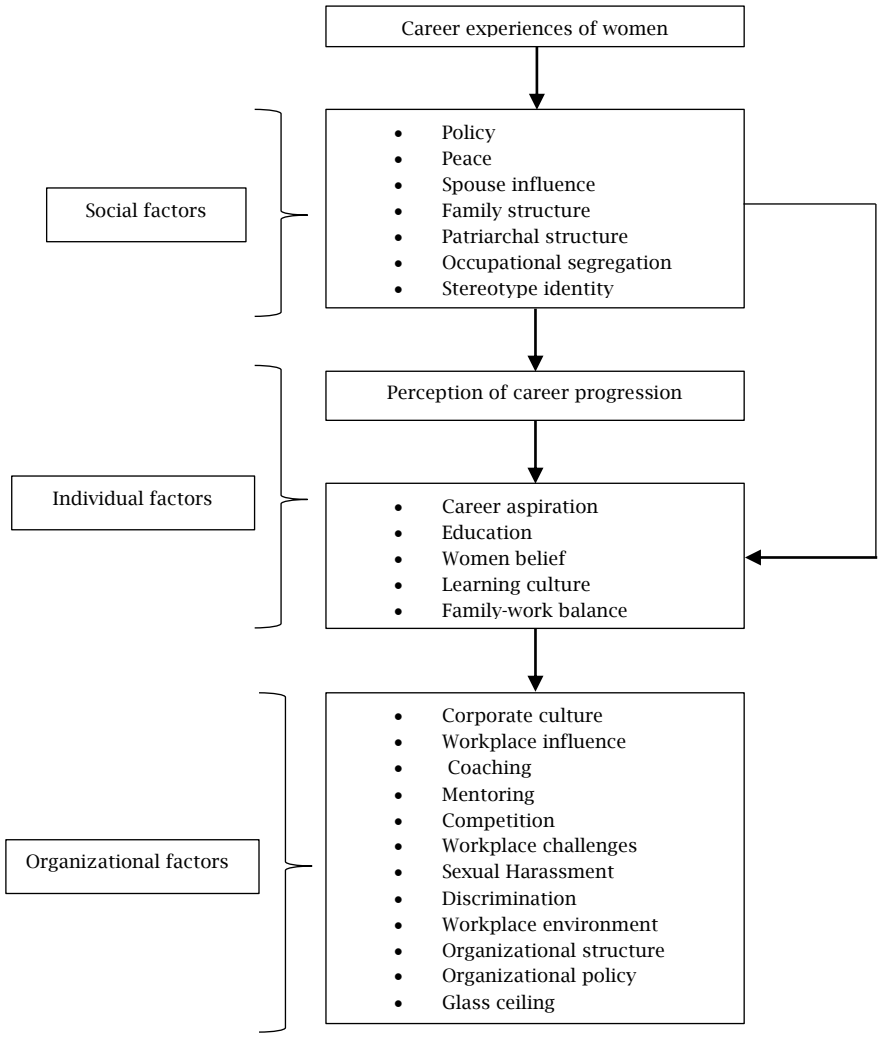
The existence of stereotypes still stifles women's career progress in the South African workplace, adversely impacting women's careers paths and relationships at work (Oosthuizen, Tonelli, & Mayer, 2019). In the past, women had a history of negative stereotypes, thus creating a wall for them to ascend to executive positions. Women are viewed as competent but are stereotyped as aggressive, which is not a good quality that will lead them to a top-level position in the workplace (Einarsdottir, Christiansen, & Kristjansdottir, 2018). This example shows how neo-colonialism has perpetuated societal fractions in Africa, such as when women in South Africa describe their careers as caught up in the past.

Equally the existence of the gender earnings gap in South African corporate workforce is an issue that reflects various factors such as sex-based differences in skills and qualifications, which means that an investment in women leads to a lower-earning potential (Niymbanira & Sabela, 2019). Therefore, the more the requirement for experience, the more significant the gender wage gap between women and men becomes; thus, a substantial portion of the earnings gap is unexplainable and potentially derives from discrimination at the workplace (Smith, Vardiabasis, Seaman, & Adamov, 2021). A part of the unexplained portion of the gender earnings gap in South Africa between women and men may be due to unobservable factors such as motivation, leadership ability and discriminatory networks. However, the research is still silent on why the implementation of equity policy on pay is still a problem in South Africa after 27 years of democracy.

Moreover, unfairness has been a part of the experience of women for years during and after apartheid (Joseph, 2021). Women's exclusion from certain categories of positions has been blamed on a masculinity syndrome, which challenges the acknowledgement of its occurrence (Halberstam, 1998). One way to think about this issue is to ask what would happen if gender equality for women was achieved. Would it not recreate another form of inequality for men? In South Africa, corporate boardrooms have largely been dominated by men, but this has been challenged in recent years as companies have come to see the value of having a more gender-balanced board in the corporate South African workforce (Viviers, Mans-Kemp, & Fawcett, 2017). In recent times, this has changed, and more women are now featured in leadership positions (Schmitt & Wilkesmann, 2020). What is not clear is how women interpret the past and present experiences of feminism within the norms and equity policy. This study unravels the thinking around experiences of women in the workplace beyond an explanation of gender equality. It reconstructs that women's experiences in the workplace can be reframed within the social, personal and organisational factors of post-apartheid South Africa.

Figure 1 shows the interconnection of social factors, individual factors and organisational factors as a determining mechanism for women's career experiences as related to their personal career development in terms of stereotype identity, aspiration, informal and formal mentoring and organisational policy.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Social factors, individual factors and organisational factors



The literature and conceptual framework guided the thinking, methodological choice and analysis of this paper.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants for this study were three women of different races, black, white and Indian, who worked as senior corporate managers. The age range of the participants was between 35 and 50. All the participants were born in South Africa; they had fluent English and had work experience in a senior corporate South African management position, e.g., as general manager, corporate affairs director and regional senior manager. They acknowledged that discrimination existed within the workplace. All the participants had at least a bachelor's degree qualification. A semi-structured interview protocol based on a primary research question was developed to understand women's career experiences in the workplace. The interview covered questions around participants' experiences of their career development and whether they were happy working in the specific organisation.

Meanwhile, this research can also be conducted using a narrative research design. The narrative approach is also suitable for this research because it allows exploring the workplace situation experienced by women who work in information and communications technology organisations in South Africa. In other words, detailed information beyond the interview schedule can be obtained because it allows close engagement of the study participants.

3.1. Sampling

Purposive sampling (Alvi, 2016) was used in this study to select senior women managers from the number of women in top managerial positions who could articulate their lived experiences in the workplace. The sample consisted of three women who were senior personnel members from different provinces in South Africa who were interviewed. Although the sample for the interviews was not intended to be representative, it was deemed sufficient to offer insight into their experiences relating to how they had traversed the path to seniority. This study was conducted in compliance with the organisation's rules and regulations, and written consent was obtained from participants who did it voluntarily without any form of compensation. The interviews were conducted in person with the participants using audiotape and note-taking in their respective private offices.

3.2. Data analysis

The thematic analysis was used through an iterative phenomenological procedure for practical data analysis (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017). After the interviews, the transcripts were reviewed and analysed to generate deeper insights and meaning. Significant features were developed in an arranged approach, and then codes were assigned across the whole data set to enable the data to be transcribed and organised into groups. Subsequently, codes assigned to the data were assembled into themes, which were synthesised into the narratives of the textures of the experiences to provide precise descriptions of what participants experienced regarding career progression in the workplace. Finally, the themes generated were aligned with the code extracted to map out the thematic analysis.

4. RESULTS

From the transcript extracts, non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements were identified. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in three themes of women's careers — choice, learning on the job and job satisfaction (noted in Table 1). Three themes emerged regarding the prevailing factors related to the career experiences of women in the workplace environment — social factors, individual factors and organisational factors. Figure 1 is a conceptual framework to illustrate the connection between women's career experiences. The model is structured into three categories or phases — phase one includes societal beliefs, the next phase involves individual perception, lastly, the final phase involves organisational features determining the situation.

4.1. Women's careers: Choice

The participants narrated their story that it had always been their desire to work in the corporate sector. According to them, the decision to work in a communication organisation was purposeful. Their narratives confirmed that even before they started to work in the chosen company, they had familiarised themselves with the company's profile to learn some opportunities that might be available for them in terms of career development for employees. Through the company's profiles and annual reports, they found that employees, especially women, had opportunities to progress in their careers. The participants had specifically searched for organisations that supported the career advancement of women in the corporate environment. According to them, the communication company was the best choice. This is similar to Georgia studies where gender discrimination hampered communication channels and consistently affected promotion for women (Kharadze, Paichadze, Paresashvili, & Pirtskhalaishvili, 2019).

The participants were impressed that a female regional manager had progressed to the position of executive director. The participants were very hopeful and convinced that they also could use the opportunities available in the organisation to build careers for themselves. The participants explained that they had found the organisation's corporate identity attractive, and that encouraged them to choose a career in such an industry. The participants further confirmed that the organisation had attractive image branding, including its retail customer outlets in and around malls in the country. One of the participants identified the company logo as projecting corporate uniqueness.

The participants discussed how their parents had assisted them in choosing career in the corporate sector. One of the participants narrated how her mother had encouraged and assisted her in her career. She explained that her mother, a retired financial manager in one of the communication organisations in South Africa, influenced her in choosing career in the telecommunication industry. Her mother had worked in the industry in different departments before she finally retired years ago in the finance department as finance manager in one of the company's regional offices. Some of the stories she heard from her mother about the opportunities available for employees encouraged her to join the company twelve years ago. According to her, the advice she received from her mother assisted her in her career choice, and to her, this had made her dreams come true for her to work in an organisation where she felt she would definitely progress in her future career.

The participants admitted that they had career plans when they joined the telecommunication company. When they joined the company they planned to aspire to the top positions in the organisation. One of the participants was interested in operations management, so she decided to pursue her career because she had seen the potential in operation management. Her belief was that the communication organisation would assist her in reaching her career goals in the future. She maintained that the communication organisation usually supported the careers of employees, especially women who wished to build a career to the top level. She believed in the company's developmental programme organised for employees through succession planning programmes for staff to undergo training, which assisted women employees and that had assisted her in achieving her desire to become senior operations manager in the company.

The women managers interviewed confirmed that the company policy was flexible to the extent that it encouraged women to build their careers in the company; although they narrated that the company supported them, women still found it difficult to attain upper positions within the communication organisation. According to the participants, there were only a few women occupying managerial positions compared to male counterparts. They explained that despite the support from the company to develop women in different departments, there still seemed to be a wide gap as men occupied the majority of the top positions in the company. In addition, the participants mentioned that they could advance in their careers in the company through their

personal efforts through networking. One of the participants confirmed that her present position as executive director was through informal networking supported by her former superior, a finance director, who retired two years after she had been promoted to the position she presently occupies. Participants explain that they attained the positions they now occupy because they were mentored by senior colleagues in management. However, this would not have been possible if the company policy did not support women to achieve their career goals.

The participants wanted to work in a company that supports their career ambitions to become senior managers. According to the participants, climbing the career ladder is extremely important for them to achieve their desired goals of greater heights in their areas of speciality in the communication organisation. The participants believed that a company such as the communication organisation would support their dreams because they offered their employees, especially women, opportunities through developmental training programmes to develop in their careers. The following are illustrative quotes:

"Through the company profile, I believed it is a place I can build my career in and possibly grow to the highest position. When I read through the company history, I found out that it is a place for me to develop my career. I never regretted choosing a career in such a company because it is my desired organisation to work with. My reason to have joined such an organisation is personal because I believe that there will be career success for me in the future in the company. I have made the right choice for myself in the corporate world" (corporate identity).

"Choosing a career in the communication organisation was through the assistance of my parents. They had played a key role in my career journey, especially my father, who supported me throughout my career path. My father had been working in the corporate world for twenty years before he retired. My father had always been my mentor throughout my career life. If not for the guidance and support I got from my father, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to work in such a big organisation like the telecommunication company, with his encouragement and advice, I was able to make the right choice for myself" (parental influence).

"My career dream was to become a senior corporate manager and director in one of the best companies in South Africa. When I joined the communication organisation, I planned to rise to the top and become a finance director, and to my surprise, the company planning programmes aligned with my vision to reach the peak of my career in the corporate environment" (career plans).

4.2. Women's careers: Learning on the job

The participants explain that they have learnt on the job since they joined the company. One of the participants mentioned that since she has started her career in the company thirteen years ago, she learnt a lot, coupled with opportunities open for career development within the company. She further narrated that immediately after she had joined the communication organisation, she underwent induction training and attended orientation programmes meant for newly recruited employees. She further explained that through induction training, she understood the company's regulations regarding employees, especially the company's policy and culture, the responsibilities of employees, superior-subordinate relationships, regulations regarding leave, hours of duties, and the company's ethical rules. According to the participants, they found that the training they had at the initial stage of their careers in the company had exposed them to many issues regarding the do's and don'ts of the organisation. To them, learning on the job was important and useful because it shaped them to fit into the company, especially in the corporate world, which they all felt so passionate about since they started to build their careers.

The participants believed that they had opportunities to attend several training programmes. Some of these programmes have played significant roles in their career paths. One of the participants identified that the training she had attended so far in the company was very useful for her career growth. The participants narrated that they have been chosen to attend different training programmes since they joined the organisation based on their performance in the company. According to them, these programmes have been very supportive of their continued enjoyment of some of the benefits and opportunities available to build their careers in the company. The participants believed that they had acquired different skills on the job through training, and according to them, they could effectively perform their tasks beyond expectations. According to them, training is very helpful to grow in their career in the organisation. In addition, the participants revealed that some of the training programmes that they have attended included management leadership training and strategic quality assurance training. They explained that through leadership training attended, they understand how to attain a top position in the company.

Table 1 below describes the clustered themes as related to the career of women in terms of choice, learning on the job and job satisfaction with associated meanings. Thus, the table illustrates the themes with formulated meanings associated with the career experiences of women in terms of their career paths in the corporate world.

Table 1. Career experiences of women in corporate sector

Themes	*Formulated meanings*
Women's careers: Choice	Role model
	Peer groups
	Social factor
	Family
	Cultural context
	Different life roles
	Individualism
	Interest
	Mind-set
	Personal value
	Prior experiences
	Social conditions of life
Women's careers: Learning on the job	Performance
	Organisational change
	Competition
	Organisational culture
	Knowledge
	Skills
	Technological change
Women's careers: Job satisfaction	Policy
	Practice
	Organisational support
	Appreciation
	Work situation
	Wage
	Promotion
	Development
	Belongingness
	Recognition
	Accomplishment

The participants agreed that the number of years spent on the job was helpful for their career advancement in the company. One of the participants narrated that she had spent over ten years in the company. She occupied positions that included a team leader, a sectional head, and a regional manager. The participants explained that they had acquired enormous experience since they joined the communication organisation. They mentioned that years spent on the job assisted them in their careers to perform some leadership roles and take appropriate decisions in the interest of employees and the company. According to them, the years of experience on the job opened numerous career opportunities for them within the company. They believed that through experience, they could mentor subordinate employees to become future managers in the company. The participants believed that they had gained vast experience on the job performing different roles such as leadership and strategic functions for the communication organisation, and this assisted them in understanding the job.

Participants believed learning on the job had created an avenue for them to remain competitive and add value to the company and their career development. Over the course of the participants' careers, it became indicative that the advantages of learning on the job benefitted them to build their careers and access superior positions. The following are illustrative quotes:

"I have acquired skills through learning on the job over the years and learnt new ideas. Participants maintained that so far they have learnt certain techniques through the company organised learning programmes for employees on the job. Some of the participants confirmed that they have developed in their careers because of the opportunities they had to learn on the job in the communication organisation" (learning on job).

"The communication organisation through some of its training programmes for us, such as strategic quality assurance training, assisted us to understand how employees can maintain quality in terms of job specifications. We have learnt how to effectively take precise decisions that will grow the organisations" (training).

One of the participants said that she had attended more than fifty training programs since she joined the company. According to her, part of this training on the job helped her to understand how she could move to the top echelons in the organisation. They confirmed that training had enlightened them more and they acquired knowledge and skills on the job, which thus assisted them to be competent on their job tasks.

Talking about the *experience*, according to the participants, they had experienced uneven and excellent [training] in their career paths in the communication organisation. They mentioned that at the initial stage of their career in the company it wasn't an easy route for them to be successful in their careers as they faced certain organisational challenges being women. However, later on in their career, they became acquainted with the organisational culture. Experiences they gained so far after some years they had joined the communication organisation were helpful for them to progress in their career path.

4.3. Women's careers: Job satisfaction

The participants mentioned work-related benefits in the communication organisation. They confirmed that it wasn't easy for them when they started their career at the organisation, but later they enjoyed some work benefits in terms of welfare packages for employees, such as overseas training and other allowances they receive as senior managers. In addition, employees can rotate during their careers within the same organisation between departments. For instance, one of the participants mentioned that she could change from marketing to the finance department because she was very interested in finance. The participants explained that they rotated to different positions during their careers because they wanted to learn and experience new challenges and acquire new job skills in other departments.

One of the factors the participants mentioned when it came to job satisfaction was their remuneration package. According to them, it was a robust one compared to other organisations they had worked for before joining the communication organisation. They believed that people earn according to the position they occupy. However, they still believed that despite their earnings in the communication organisation, their male counterpart in the same position would still earn more than they. Though the women participants confirmed that males were still dominating the highest positions in the organisation, they believed that decision-making was determined by them. According to the participants, some allowances varied depending on the employees' position; for instance, housing allowances were not all the same, but they were sufficient. They

mentioned that allowances and salaries increased as they attained top positions in the company. The following are illustrative quotes:

"We have enjoined some benefits since we joined the organisation. We had the opportunity to change job and time of working hours. [This] is flexible which thus allows us to do our personal things without any form of restriction" (job flexibility).

"We feel comfortable with the salaries we earn in this organisation. In actual fact, we are happy with the income and other benefits the company offers us. Though our income increases gradually as we attain managerial positions in the company in all it sustain us" (remuneration).

"Some of the benefits we enjoyed in the organisation included offshore training opportunities available for staff. Participants mentioned that from the position of senior supervisors to senior managers, there are opportunities to attend short courses outside South Africa, this happens once in two years for employees who occupied senior positions in the company. According to them, it has benefitted some women who are within these categories in the organisation" (benefits).

4.4. Social factors: Policy

The participants shared experiences of policy in relation to gender issues at the workplace. They gave an example of social exclusion from top managerial positions at workplaces inclusive of private and public sectors of the economy. Essentially, they feel that women are not treated fairly compared to the men who are at an advantage and dominate top positions in the workplaces and possibly determine the allocation of the company's top positions. They believe that opportunities for career growth are challenging for them as they have to find a way of competing to achieve success in their careers. The following are illustrative quotes:

"I can say that we have not really been supported to attain high positions in the corporate world despite the efforts of organisation. In most cases, the policy on gender equality is not properly implemented as there are still only a few women in top managerial positions across the country. I can attest that we (women) still face challenges at workplaces; not only that we struggle to rise to a higher position, only a few of us have the opportunities to be at executive level. Even a few of us at the top don't have the opportunity to partake in some critical decisions. At times I feel that aspiring to the top positions at workplace is one thing, but another thing is to get the fulfilment on the job. For me, it's a bit better but for [the] vast majority it is a problem. In my opinion, I think there is a need for government through private sectors to initiate a policy of 50–50 equal representation of women in higher positions".

"I think women empowerment in the public and private sectors is not enough as [it is] at present; the question is who is behind the policy formulation on gender equity? I had once worked in the public sector before joining the private sector, things are not in shape at all, what I mean is that the majority always have their say which is mostly dominated by the males. For a few of us who were opportune to be part of decision-making process, we have no choice rather than to join the majority. Actually, I left the government job because of these scenarios, but unfortunately the same thing happens in the corporate world. For some of us who have ambitions, we work hard".

4.5. Social factors: Patriarchal societal practice

The participant's notion in this regard is about what everyone believes about women being followers of men. According to the participants, this idea is entrenched in our societal cultural value systems, particularly in Africa, which positions the men first before the women. They believe that the practices and ideology have been in existence and it thus gave the men the lead over them. Some of these practices still prevail and form a part of what creates a gap between men and women in all sectors of society. Therefore, it is difficult to break through these invisible barriers as it has been accepted as a norm and institutionalised as a cultural value. An example is when appointments into higher positions are made, men always have an advantage. The following are illustrative quotes:

"Some of the factors affecting us as women in the corporate world are that we are being tagged to be as the token or weaker group. The men dominate virtually all departments in terms of senior positions. For some [of] us that are lucky to be in higher position[s], it's by informal networking and self-efforts based on our ambition, else we might not be able to reach the top positions we aspire to be in our careers".

"It has not been easy for women working in an environment that is male-dominated. I think about this issue. At times it is difficult to find myself in this situation, but I keep focusing on my career growth as I have no choice but to get use[d] to the system. Oftentimes I noticed that when you join a discussion on a particular project, the men's decisions outnumbered the few women at the executive level".

4.6. Social factors: Stereotype identity

According to the participants, a stereotyped identity is a form of bias, which is considered oversimplified by the other gender group and might not necessarily be accurate but rather is a way of creating an unfair and unequal treatment for them at the workplace. Participants' notion is that men believe that certain occupations are meant for men with the perception that women are not supposed to compete with them when vying for top executive positions particularly in some sectors of the economy. Following are illustrative quotes:

"The societal belief about us as women is what others see us to be. I mean, being a woman, people's thought is that we are not suppose[d] to be at same par with [the] other gender group, I mean men. The societal norms place us to be supporting the men being the head of the family; thus, that has created a difficult situation for us as women. The men, by virtue of their gender, believe they had upper opportunities than the women to occupy managerial positions".

"I think the gender differentiation is a big challenge in this context of sexism, this gender stereotype is creating difficulties among people. The ideology behind this concept is to suppress

the emotion of the other gender group. Even within the workplace environment, we hardly find someone to mentor us to climb through the career ladder to the top. For instance, some of us who are ambitious had to network informally through self-efforts to attain the present positions we occupy now".

4.7. Individual factors: Career aspiration

Participants revealed that career growth is part of their aspiration in the corporate world. They consider themselves to have worked hard in the organisation with a good network to attain the present position. Although they confirmed it was not as easy as they thought to become a part of decision-making. Their experiences in the organisation when they first joined were awful for them; some of them were harassed by male colleagues. But to them, they were able to curtail the intimidation and other workplace challenges through self-generated efforts which thus assisted them to progress in their career paths. The following are illustrative quotes:

"I have always wanted to be a career person since I started my career in corporate world. I am dedicated to my job because I believe in the ideology of working hard to rise to the top. Though it is a difficult thing to achieve within a few years, but at the end, I did achieve my career goal to be one of the top managers where I work".

"I found it fascinating to build career[s] among different sets of people. Particularly among men who dominate virtually the executive positions. My experience within the workplace is like a subordinate who is trying to find her way to the top, but for me to break through the invisible barriers, it took me a long time to achieve my career goal of becoming a general manager in a company. I never expected to rise because the majority of my line managers are males".

4.8. Individual factors: Education

All participants shared their experiences, referring to learning on the job as good, which means it is useful for them on their career paths. According to the participants, learning while working is a key to career success. The following are illustrative quotes:

"My organisation supported me to study on the job. I had a good qualification before I joined the company ten years ago. My qualification has really assisted me a lot on the jobs, it created opportunities for me to engage in further study while working I still study through the company policy encouraging women to acquire additional qualifications".

"I realise that most employers engage employees in learning and trainings programmes in other to assist them to learn more on the job. For instance, my organisation organises different training programs for all workers in order to be adept at their tasks".

4.9. Individual factors: Family-work balance

The participants believed that it has not been easy for them to combine work and family issues altogether. Combining both functions is strenuous and tasking, but they had no choice, instead they had to adjust and not lose focus on their careers. The participants revealed that they are seen as performing different roles as caregiver, wife and mother and at the same time as a manager. The requirements of these roles could at times affect them in the course of their career journey in the workplace, especially for the categories of women interested in building their career to managerial levels in the organisation. However, their experiences in this context stimulated them to continue pursuing their career, irrespective of family challenges, which has kept them going throughout their career paths.

The following are illustrative quotes:

"The coping strategy for me, particularly on the job, is that I make sure that my family issues do not affect my work. Even when I started the job it was a bit difficult for me as a mother to cope but I face the task, although I have a supportive and understanding spouse who at all times assisted me when the need arises".

"It is a stressful situation for me to combine household work and my job, but as someone who is interested in building a career in the corporate world, I find it deems to continue to manage every condition [in which] I found myself, particularly in the areas [of] job task. I mostly spend much of my time at work, but still I offer my commitment to my family, especially during the time my attention is needed at home. As a career woman, at a point, one feels uncomfortable, but I keep enduring because I felt it's a matter of tolerance for me to achieve my career goals".

4.10. Organisational factors: Corporate culture

The idea of organisational culture to the participants is a challenging issue for women who work in the corporate environment. They identify the underlying causes of this apparent inhospitable climate for women at the workplace as a wall that inhibits progress for women at every stage of their career development. These corporate cultures to them are an aspect of male-oriented corporate culture that is hostile to women and disparities in the distribution of high-quality job assignments. The following is an illustrative quote:

"The organisation patterns in terms of equal access to management continue to be a problem for the women, and thus create different standards for women and men. Even, there is a salary discrepancy because of one's sex".

4.11. Organisational factors: Discrimination

In placing the issue of discrimination against women in context, participants maintain that men still form the prime wall inhibiting women's progress in management. They further state that despite some progress, old-fashioned sexist attitudes are still common and represent a real, not imagined, obstacle to women's progress. However, discrimination based on any assumed differences between men and women is both ill-grounded and immoral to them since human beings are capable of learning by their very nature. The following are illustrative quotes:

"We are sometimes being oppressed in that employers moreover see us as provisional occupation holders, as opposed to career-orientated employees and they do not afford us the necessary support

needed, status and position of responsibility, or promotional prospects".

"At times organisational practices discriminate against us in a situation where employers preferred hiring single women and reserved specific jobs with higher pay for men, whom they claimed were more mobile and actually suited to the job".

4.12. Organisational factors: Glass ceiling

The participants have uncovered evidence that they are still struggling to fill top leadership roles in the workplace. The glass ceiling describes the restraints that inhibit women from rising to the leading levels without there being active discrimination by employers. This notion, according to them, is unfortunate, but the problem is more fundamental because they believe that they still face a difficult choice that men do not in terms of family or career. The following is an illustrative quote:

"My experience within the workplace environment when I joined years back was that I face immediate discrepancies when it comes to promotions and remuneration. Even within the first three years, I was seeing myself and other women earning four per cent less than men. This pay gap continues to grow, and by the time I reach [a] certain age in my career, the men had already become managers and senior managers".

5. DISCUSSION

The study gives voice to the career experiences of three women corporate managers who have achieved success in their career paths against a variety of odds but whose voices and access to key professional top hierarchical positions are still somewhat marginalised. Through powerful participants' quotes, the lived experiences affirmed that certain limitations still hinder ambitious professional women in the workplace (Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015). A finding in this study is that women professionals strive beyond expectations through self-efforts to show that they have strong career ambitions despite hindrances restricting them from achieving their careers in the corporate world. These narrative experiences of women in the work environment concur with the notion that irrespective of the position women hold at the workplace, they continue to be discriminated against in terms of access to top positions.

The results revealed in the study indicate that the women have career plans to aspire to the peak of their careers. The participants shared their workplace environment incidents, which conveyed their desired goal for their career paths; they seemed to believe in the opportunities that might be available for them to achieve career success at the workplace. The women in this study adopted strategic planning techniques to support their aspirations for senior management levels in the corporate environment. It was revealed through participants' shared experiences that structural and social factors facilitated their careers; they narrated that their parents influenced their choice of career (Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2016). Despite holding senior managerial positions in the South African workplace, women's contribution to decision-making is still undermined. The findings in this study indicated that women find it difficult in some cases to have their voice heard because specific organisational culture barriers exclude them through discrimination (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). The study revealed that especially women in the early and late thirties experienced awful experiences in the South African workplace environment. The participants shared that they were intimidated and sexually abused by senior male colleagues in the process of advancing their careers to the managerial levels.

The findings in this study point to women being labelled as other groups who do not have the capabilities to lead at the workplace. This notion creates distinction in the corporate organisation, which means that women have been neglected over time when performing leadership roles (Combs & Milosevic, 2016). This conception has implications for the corporate organisation to function appropriately given the changes and competition in the world market. Organisations must attract competent and talented women who possess the required skills and ability to support corporate organisations to achieve their goals rather than marginalising women. However, corporate leadership is an important factor in this context to shape the organisation's culture, which ultimately provides opportunities for women in the organisation to realise their potentials. The participants showed expressions of marginalisation at the workplace and the unpleasant impact these experiences have on their career achievement. Organisations should be proactive on the issues of discrimination (Dubbelt, Rispens, & Demerouti, 2016).

The participants discussed that organisation policy seemed not to be too favourable to them, which they believe is a barrier to their career success at the workplace. Despite occupying senior positions in terms of remuneration, there is still bias leading to unequal pay. Equal pay for the participants leads to job efficiency and more commitment, leading to career progression for them. The organisational policy needs to be open to support networks amongst employees. According to the participants, this might create opportunities for junior women workers who aspire to higher positions in their career. Research has shown that networking is a key and critical way of developing employees in an organisation because individuals at the workplace want to associate with social groups of different genders, social statuses and races. Networking may assist them in developing key skills and increasing exposure to decision-making (Carnabuci & Diószegi, 2015).

6. CONCLUSION

Corporate organisations have the responsibility and opportunities to offer formal training for subordinate and superior employees and educate and inform management about discrimination against women in the workplace. Given the intersecting identity of gender, women are usually vulnerable to workplace discrimination that might result in them not realising the full potentials in their career and their contribution to global business output. It is necessary for further research

to examine the complexities of experiences of women managers in the South African workplace environment. Finally, another phase in research that is imperative on the career experiences of women is to promote, develop and identify effective coping strategies and understand their psychological and mental feelings from an environmental perception. This understanding can facilitate the resolution of the issues of oppression against women in the corporate world.

The findings of this study have implications for policy review and implementation in developing countries. Gender equality in many developing countries is not holistic, technical and doesn't have a framework for implementation at the workplace. This study reveals the need to rethink policies from grassroots for women to advance their career.

However, this study is limited to the investigation in the telecommunication industry, and the sample includes senior managers. This limitation influences generalisation and applicability of the findings to all sectors in South Africa or in other developing countries. Also, the demographic structure including the history of South Africa required more in-depth research that will consider also the impact of socio-demographic characteristics of women to understand what it means for policy and women across different sectors of the economy.

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